

DRAGONBY 1964

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT
THE IRON AGE AND ROMANO-BRITISH SITE AT
DRAGONBY, NEAR SCUNTHORPE, LINCOLNSHIRE

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THE SITE

The site, (SK 905138) lies some seven miles south of the Humber on a sloping shelf of land formed by the Pecten Ironstone Bed protruding from beneath the main scarp of the Jurassic limestone of the Lincoln Edge. Elevated, well-drained (a surface deposit of wind-blown sand covers much of the shelf), protected from the full force of easterly winds by the crest of the scarp, and watered by a spring, the site was exceptionally suitable for early settlement.

PREVIOUS WORK

Digging in 1926-27 established the presence of Romano-British buildings and other structures in a field previously from its surface finds as Money Field. Two Romano-British pottery kilns were discovered in 1940. The first indications of pre-Roman Iron Age settlement came from 1950 onwards, when coins and Belgic pottery were picked up after ploughing. Trial excavations in 1963 by R. H. Arrand revealed Iron Age ditches, and a third Romano-British pottery kiln.

QUARRYING

Slow but continuous open-cast mining has destroyed about half of the originally 40 acre Money Field. The scale of the operations and the type of machinery used preclude the possibility of emergency excavations during the actual course of mining.

EXCAVATIONS IN 1964

Soon after the 1963 excavations, it became known that further mining would destroy the entire known extent of the site within a few more years, and that 5 acres were to be destroyed early in 1965. Four acres were then surveyed with a proton magnetometer by Dr. P. Strange (University of Nottingham) and Dr. M. J. Aitken (University of Oxford) in January and February 1964, and this indicated a great number and variety of buried features. Eight weeks (June 1st - July 31st) were spent excavating some of the threatened features in detail, and exploring other possibilities. The excavation was sponsored and partly financed by Scunthorpe Borough Museum, with further financial assistance from the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries, the Haverfield Bequest, and the University of Nottingham. Six labourers were employed for eight weeks, but only six volunteers for the last three weeks were recruited. Most of the photography was carried out free of charge by Lysaght's Scunthorpe Works, and a mechanical digger was provided by the Byfield Ironstone Company. Accommodation for the volunteers was provided at Normanby Hall by the kindness of the Normanby Hall Committee of Scunthorpe Borough Council; the excavation was made possible by the willing co-operation of the farmer, Mr. S. Revitt; the finds have been given to Scunthorpe by the owners of the land.

To all these people and institutions, the Dragonby Excavations Committee is deeply grateful.

THE RESULTS

Romano-British Features

Scattered occupation was encountered in most areas excavated, the latest levels being badly damaged by recent ploughing. Some features located could not be investigated fully, because of lack of resources.

1. A well, approximately 9ft. in depth from the Romano-British ground level, was cleared out but not dismantled. This yielded a small series of 2nd - 3rd. century pottery, a pewter or latten jug, and animal bones.
2. A fourth pottery kiln, well preserved, was completely excavated, and samples of its structure were taken for remnant magnetic dating by M. Tite of the Oxford Laboratory. The wares produced included jugs, jars (some with heavy rustication), bowls (some with tripod feet) and cheese wrings. A flavian date is likely.
3. Three small ovens or hearths of uncertain purpose were excavated.
4. Various pits, post-holes, gullies and ditches were located and excavated. Stone wall foundations and floors of two buildings were located; both were near the surface and damaged.
5. Two metalled roads were encountered in trial trenches, one of which was followed for over 100 feet with the aid of the proton magnetometer. The other was a substantial structure, widened or repaired more than once, with a total width of 25 feet.

Iron Age Features

Ditches and gullies ranging in size from 1ft. to 4ft. in widths and depths were the commonest structures found. Two were cleared of fillings in lengths of 60-70 feet, in order to obtain large groups of associated pottery. In some cases re-cutting was apparent, but most had homogeneous fillings. No direct evidence of use was obtained, but preliminary analysis of their contents and sequences provided by intersections, suggest a considerable temporal range. Daub suggests the proximity of buildings, but none were found; slag and a crucible indicates metal-working on the site, and a bone comb is likely to have been used for scoring pottery. Two Iron Age coins were found, bringing the total from the site to six, but neither was stratified significantly.

On the basis of the pottery, a provisional chronology may be suggested:

1. An "earlier Belgic" phase, which may not be the earliest on the site. This is characterised by hand-and wheel-made local pottery in soft brown or black fabrics. Forms are mainly bowls, jars and pedestal urns; surface decoration, besides cordons and bulges, is unusually

frequent, including burnished vertical and horizontal lines and zones, diagonal hatching, chevrons and lattice patterns, curvilinear and linear rouletting with double square-toothed wheel, stamped circles, and scoring. Many of the forms and other elements are outside the normal range of Iron Age C pottery found elsewhere. Other material includes an iron penannular brooch of E. Fowler's Type B; the triangular crucible, the bone comb, and various minor items of iron, bronze, bone and stone. This phase was well represented quantitatively in the 1964 excavations.

2. A "later Belgic" phase, again characterised by hand-and wheel-made local pottery, but the latter is often of superior quality to the wheel-made pottery of the earlier phase. Also characteristic are imported wares - butt beakers (Camulodunum Form 113), and terra nigra. Other material includes an iron La Tene III brooch. This phase was less well represented in the 1964 excavations.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The earliest gullies represent occupation by Belgic peoples who had penetrated into the east Midlands from the continent via the Humber or the Lincolnshire coast, in the 1st. century B.C. (It is tempting, but not yet possible, to link this with the penetration of Lincolnshire by Belgic elements in the first half of the 1st. century B.C. suggested on the coin evidence by D. F. Allen). However, by the end of the 1st. century B.C. at the latest, the settlement at Dragonby must have been well-established. Elements of an earlier population may have survived to modify its culture.

Some time within the first half of the 1st. century A.D., a further modification of culture resulted from contacts with other Belgic cultures in Britain, probably along the coast from Essex, or possible also overland, via Old Sleaford and Ancaster, from Leicester.

Apart from a few isolated objects, there is no good evidence yet at Dragonby for the arrival of the Roman army in the area in the 40's A.D. But full romanisation had begun by the last quarter of the 1st. century A.D. with the beginnings of a pottery industry producing distinctive Romano-British wares. Scattered occupation continued on the site throughout the Roman period, down to the 4th century A.D.